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# MEETING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN ORDINARY SETTINGS: RATIONALE PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES

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## ABSTRACT

*Special Educational needs children are perhaps the most vulnerable of all the minority and disadvantaged groups in any society. Their understanding and ability to communicate are presumed to be limited. Their educational and life experiences and opportunities to participate in decision-making of their lives are somewhat restricted in segregated settings. In a more violent sense, they are vulnerable from the moment they are born if medical practitioners persuade parents to allow an infant with, say Down's syndrome to die withholding treatment essential for the survival. Throughout the whole of their lives, they are vulnerable in a different sense to abuse of power by professionals who are driven by a conviction that they know best what is good for them. They are also made more vulnerable by the widespread under-estimation by others of their capacity to learn and function in ordinary settings*

*This paper discusses the rationale for educating children with special educational needs in ordinary settings. It also outlines related problems and some strategies of educating them in regular settings.*

## Introduction

### Historical Perspectives

Historically, ordinary institutions have always been set to exclude some children from the mainstream. This segregation has been legitimised and facilitated by attitudes about 'normality' and the development of psychological testing and assessment techniques.

These techniques were designed in France by Alfred Binet in 1905, and were revised and popularised in the U.S.A by Henry Goddard Lewis Terman in 1910 and 1916 respectively. The assessment techniques were aimed at identifying intellectual individual differences in order to classify and thereupon segregate. To this effect, Lewis Terman wrote: "It is safe to predict that in the near future intelligence tests will bring thousands of these high grade defectives under the surveillance and protection of society" Gould, 1981, p. 179).

If we go back to the last century, there were 'norms' of an educational client group who would be accepted into the mainstream and a 'subnormal' group who would be rejected or placed elsewhere. A separate system of Special Schools therefore arose in the past because of the general acceptance that it was all-right to draw a line between 'normal' and 'abnormal'. A dual system of special and ordinary schools developed as an administrative solution in which special educational provision and special placement were synonymous. Decisions about meeting special educational needs have often been pre-empted by 'where' the provision was available.

However, in recent years, these attitudes have been questioned at a fundamental level. Excluding children and young persons with learning disabilities or difficulties from an ordinary educational setting is increasingly seen as a discrimination and major human rights issue.

### **Rationale for Meeting Special Educational Needs in Ordinary Settings**

Historically, the strongest argument for meeting special educational needs in ordinary settings is that culturally biased assessments discriminated unfairly against non-caucasian children, and labelling – especially with the old educational sub-normal (ESN), tag, landed them in special schools with lower expectations of achievement. This is still an underlying anxiety. Educating special needs children in ordinary settings has recently emerged as a significant challenge to education in Southern

Africa as elsewhere in the world community. To date, however, little information is available of integration policies in different countries in Africa which, in many cases is still evolving.

Integrationists like (Hegarty, 1987; Booths & Potts, 1985; Stainback & Stainback, 1984) argue that it reflects victorian prejudice to put away any child with special educational needs into separate schools. This argument implies that we should not segregate such children like lepers. It should at this point be realized that no parent wants his child to be barred from a normal school in which he might be happy, parents should be free to make that choice. Twenty-five years ago, Dunn (1968) criticised the segregation of children with special educational needs. He claimed that there was no evidence that the programmes or environments of special classes consistently benefited the special needs child and that they could suffer social and personal disadvantages from being stigmatised and removed from the mainstream of education. He concluded that there was little evidence that special education programmes differed from those in regular school except for being watered down and at a slower pace. The rationale for meeting Special Educational Needs in ordinary settings is based on two major premises. The first is that the instructional needs of children do not warrant the operation of the dual system. The second is the inefficiency of operating a dual system.

Special Education was developed in 1830 in Abenberg, Switzerland by Johann Jacob Guggenbuhl and, in 1931 in Paris, France by Edward Seguin (Gearheart & Litton, 1975). The philosophy behind the development of these schools was to meet the instructional needs of children considered exceptional or special.

Notably, since then, there have been two types of education, Special and regular. Although special education is technically a sub-system of regular education as noted by Reynolds & Birch (1982), in effect, a dual system of education has operated, each with its own pupils, teachers, supervisory staff and funding system. While there have been attempts recently to reduce the sharp dichotomy between special and regular education

(Hegarty, 1987), the dual system basically remains intact in both industrialized and developing nations, for there are still regular and special school personnel, children and funding.

This paper stands to reason that the dual system, while initially a positive step for education is no longer needed, for it is expensive, inefficient and violates human rights. The time has therefore come for special and regular education to merge into one unified system structured to meet the unique needs of all children.

### **Special and Ordinary Child**

It is often claimed that there are two types of children – special and ordinary. In the words of (Martin, 1976, p.5) 'One of the ways in which many of us concerned with education have been incorrect is our conceptualization of children as dichotomized into normal and exceptional'. All children differ along continuums of intellectual, physical and psychological characteristics. Individual differences are universal and thus the study of deviant people is really a study of all humankind (Telford & Sawrey, 1981).

The idea that some children are distinctly different from the 'normal' population of children and are therefore 'special' has been justified on the basis that some children deviate to an extreme from the 'norm' or 'average' on one or more characteristics (Schulz & Turnbull, 1983). Designation of what is extreme has been cited for a wide range of characteristics deemed pertinent to educational success, from achievement and intellectual to emotional auditory, and visual characteristics.

Irrespective of any designated cut-offs, all children still differ in varying degrees from one another along the same continuums of differences. The designation of arbitrary cut-offs does not make children any more different between the special and ordinary groups. This may be one reason why so many researchers have resorted to complex clusters and interaction to behaviours in their definitions and sophisticated statistical analyses in their attempt to differentiate 'special' children from those who

are 'normal', 'ordinary' or 'regular'. Algozzine & Yssedyke (1983) note that when these definitions and "statistical concoctions are deemed most impressive they have included every imaginable human characteristic and scores on a myriad of tests" (p. 246).

In summary, there are not, as implied by the dual system – two distinctly different types of children (i.e. those who are special and those who are regular. In support of this view, Stainback & Stainback (1984, p.103) conclude "... all students are unique individuals, each with his own set of physical, intellectual and psychological characteristics".

## **Views and Research Findings on Integration**

Some parents feel that special schools are too sheltered, cosy and protected, away from the hurly, burly of ordinary life. They promote dependency and make the transition to adult life harder (Goodison, 1987). One may argue here that protection is necessary from prejudice, pressures of comprehensive ordinary school life like (huge numbers, complex time tabling) which would make a special needs child blank out. While this may be true to some degree, it is at the same time felt that such a child would find his level in the hurly, burly of his own making. He could tend to be emotionally expressive and explosive and the atmosphere is not cosy – stimulating, perhaps. After all, those children would build strength to face the world by confronting challenges they can grapple with. We all know that preparation for life is a major aim of the school, with opportunities for responsibility and leadership which one would never get in a mainstream school without being patronised.

An assumed consequence of providing education in ordinary settings is that there will be improved social opportunity for the integrated child (Danby and Cullen, 1988). In fact, Warnock (1978), claimed that even for children with profound learning difficulties, the friendship and society of other children can effectively stimulate personal development. A study by Denscombe, Szule, Patrick & Wood (1986) which used both behaviour observation and socio-metric measures of physically handicapped children in ordinary school, found that they were well integrated although

most of their interactions were in pairs rather than groups. The simplest 'Contact hypothesis' is based on a combination of Allport's (1954) theory that mixing reduces stereotyped attitudes and a selective use of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). It is hoped that special needs children will model their behaviour on non-handicapped peers.

A three-year study by Hegarty, Pockington & Lucas (1981) on the effect of integration on other children concluded that far from damaging ordinary schools, integration can strengthen them and enhance provision for all pupils.

The study looked at seventeen integration schemes in fourteen local Education Authorities in England and Wales. Other major findings from this study were that:

- Children with disabilities or difficulties in learning wanted to stay in ordinary schools rather than return to special schools.
- They benefited in terms of social and emotional development.
- Parents did not want their children taken out of ordinary schools once they had been placed there.
- 97% of teachers dealing with children who had disabilities or difficulties in ordinary schools wanted them to stay.
- Parents of non-handicapped children like teachers, changed from having anxieties about integration to becoming strong advocates of the change, once it had taken place.

Results from this British Study are consistent with those found in Zimbabwe by (Peresuh, 1991). The study involved special and ordinary school teachers, parents of handicapped and non-handicapped children placed in special and ordinary schools and non-handicapped primary school children placed in ordinary schools.



The study investigated the attitudes of the above mentioned population towards educating children with mild mental handicaps in regular classes. Results from this study revealed that all three groups were not opposed to educating special needs children in ordinary settings. However, parents were concerned about the availability of appropriate resources and facilities in ordinary schools while teachers felt that they were not adequately trained to handle classes with special needs children.

In another study on social relationships in ordinary educational settings in America, researchers used sociometric measures and found that normal children chose to play with each other and took little notice of their handicapped peers (Cavallaro & Porter, 1980). The friendship pattern of the normal children was such that they tended to have one partner who they would consistently choose, but the handicapped children did not seem to have such strong single relationships. This is, however, not to suggest that they cannot form relationships at all. After all, studies in Canada on integration showed that children have no trouble with integration – it is adults brought up in segregated settings and communities who hold back through fear.

Johnson & Johnson (1980) report of six specific studies that directly compared co-operatively structured learning with competitive and individualistic instruction when special needs children were integrated into ordinary classrooms. The results of these studies were consistent, indicating that group contingencies promote greater social acceptance of special needs children by their non-handicapped peers.

It is difficult to identify the evidence that support these researchers' conclusions. One such conclusion is that integration can enhance schools; one may ask here but does it? We must distinguish here between educational advantages and social advantages. There is no doubt that ordinary children's everyday experiences may be enriched by contact with handicapped peers, but that is separate consideration from their educational achievement, which might be enhanced, deteriorate, or suffer no effect.

## Questioning the Rationale of Educating Special Needs Children in Ordinary Settings.

Meeting special educational needs for children with disabilities in ordinary settings has been and remains a hotly debated issue. Most of the debate has centred around whether or not this principle works, as opposed to the value of mainstreaming as it relates to basic ideas of equality and justice. While some professionals have questioned the workability and success of current integration practices (Heller, 1983; Johnson, 1983), few people question the underlying philosophical values inherent in the integration movement. As Bogdan (1983a) points out, integration as a process is a positive and worthwhile goal. Thus, the most relevant questions we should ask about integration is why integrate, how can we integrate, what are the problems and solutions? The question of why has already been considered under rationale for educating special needs children in ordinary settings. Although integrationists tell us that special needs children who attend ordinary schools would be more part of the 'community', in some areas this may be, but such talk may have a sentimental ring in large and remote rural schools, where there are scattered, mainly 'alienated communities' served by large or distant schools. One of the most mischievous myths about integration – and there are many myths – is that children in ordinary schools will not want to be friends with children who have traditionally been in segregated educational settings. However, the argument is that in ordinary educational settings one would develop more natural relationships with ordinary kids, but studies in schools in Holland, Australia and Britain indicate that often they remain socially marginalised (Goodison, 1987).

It is noted that people have been shown successful examples of integration, but when one looks closer, the success stories tend to come from infant and lower primary schools, where teaching is project-based and less competitive and the atmosphere is nourishing. The *name calling, bullying and violence* of ordinary schools playground where there are often 1 000 pupils is not shown. In the older ranges, integration is another matter.

In over-large classes where children have to sink or swim, a special needs child would drown. Warnock (1978) in her report admitted that, the older they get, the further such children (Special Needs) fall behind their contemporaries, and without adequate resources, they lose pride in themselves and feel they are at the bottom of the pile. Warnock (1978) further claimed that educating special needs children into ordinary schools with too few resources would be educationally and psychologically damaging. It has been claimed that adequate support for a disabled child in a mainstream school costs more than keeping that child in a special school. This view is, however, challenged by a research into integration by the National Foundations for Educational Research (NFER) in Britain, which concluded that it is in fact the running of two separate systems that is expensive (Hegarty, Pocklington and Lucas, 1988).

Another problem being associated with integration is that instead of focusing on examination and competition, in which some special needs children will always be failing anyway, secondary school classrooms would need to be re-oriented towards co-operative learning. Timetables would need to be drastically revised to allow for those who take some 20 minutes to settle down, or who need continuity with one teacher to learn.

One of the central weaknesses in implementing integration has often been inadequate preparation of regular teachers to work with mainstream students (Peresuh, 1991). Although for example most Teachers Colleges in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia now include a special education component in their courses, most teachers have had little or no training in how to handle special needs children. As if responding to this deficiency in teachers, the author together with other concerned professionals initiated a degree programme, B.Ed (Special Education) which was launched at the University of Zimbabwe in March 1994.

The main objectives of this programme is to impart skills to a reasonable number of teachers who will man ordinary and special schools catering for children with various disabilities in ordinary and special settings. Furthermore, most integration training programmes have been developed from the perspectives of special education with emphasis on

individualized needs of children and diagnostic – remedial techniques which differs from the perspective of the regular teachers who are more geared to subject matter and whole classroom management systems. Such training has led to ‘confusion’ resistance and frequently unsuccessful results.

While the above problems of integration are acknowledged, it is important to note that a segregated educational setting is a selection out of the mainstream on the grounds of attributes that are beyond an individual’s control.

Children are brought together because of an apparently similar disability or difficulty in learning. We would not do this for a child who was female or who was black, coloured or otherwise. Isolating and marginalizing children with special needs from local mainstream services can no longer be tolerated in any country that claims democratic principles and human rights. People who work for segregation of disabled children have for too long failed to admit that the real reasons for wishing to maintain segregated settings include career and territorial investments as well as the convenience of keeping existing bureaucracies and beliefs about ‘abnormality’. Educational segregation is in the view of integrationists, an erosion of basic human rights.

## **The Way Ahead**

### **Parents as Partners in the Process of Educating Special Needs Children in Ordinary Settings.**

It is important to be aware of the fact that integration is not just a matter of professional judgement, but that parents should be included as partners. Parents are crucial especially in the light of the 1981 Education Act in England and Wales. The Act requires that parents be consulted and their approval must be sought at various procedures. Similarly, a clause in the Zimbabwe Policy Document requires that before placing

children in ordinary educational settings, the views of parents must be taken into account, for it is their attitudes that can also contribute to the success and failure of the practice.

The rationale for seeking parents' views and attitudes towards the practice of educating special needs children in regular settings is that parents are already teachers. In the words of Mogford: "parents are the most salient others in the child's world" (Mogford in McConachie, 1986, p.9). In view of this observation, it cannot easily be disputed that parents know their children best. They are the ones to see that something is right or wrong with their child, let alone confirmation from a professional later.

Working closely with parents in placing Special Needs Children in ordinary settings implies recognising them as partners in the implementation of policies of meeting Special Educational Needs for children with various disabilities. This means respecting their values, attitudes and strengths on a par with teachers and the children concerned. This realization was also echoed by the Warnock Report which proposed that parents should be seen as partners in the education of their children. "Indeed unless the parents are seen as equal partners in the educational process, the purpose of our report will be frustrated" (Warnock, 1978, p.150).

At least one study supports the above views. For example, Hewison (1986) study showed the benefits to a child's education of structured parental involvement in the education process.

It should be noted, however, that the issue of parental involvement is not just related to integration, but is part of a much wider debate. However, the emphasis on parental involvement in the Warnock Report and the establishment of parental pressure groups concerned with special educational needs indicate the importance of this assumption. Parents usually want to know if their child will achieve more in a special setting or in an ordinary school setting and what the advantages of each setting might be. Planners therefore need to know which children can be most successfully integrated and the optimum ways of achieving this.

### **The Need to Train Teachers**

Effective integration of special needs children into ordinary settings among other things requires:

- provision of appropriate materials and equipment;
- planning to meet specific needs of handicapped children (i.e realistic 'individualization' of approach);
- Selection and training of teachers who are to take a leading role in diagnosis, and acting as resources to other teachers.

In addition to the above requirements, the class teacher needs additional preparation, guidance and resources in managing learning, pacing learning, selecting suitable materials and activities in order to be able to cope with the increased demands made by children with a range of learning difficulties in the regular whole or part-time. Enthusiasm and philosophical commitment seem to have out-run practical preparation.

If the process of integration is to be more than a slogan, it is clear that special provision must be made for altering the curriculum to the needs of a 'special needs child' this would mean meeting some requirements such as:

- adequate spaces and learning situations which would enable the teacher to develop individualized instruction;
- a resource teacher or consultant who is able to advise the classroom teachers in planning and carrying out programmes in the regular classroom and advise them on objectives, materials and techniques as well as tutoring children directly.

Furthermore, the physical facilities would have to be re-structured to make way for the visually and physically impaired. Dunn (1968) had earlier suggested that for the process of integration to be meaningful, the following reforms should be addressed:

- more specific and prescriptive assessment for handicap;
- defining teaching objectives in relation to the child's behaviour and needs rather than to fit a diagnostic label.

While these requirements may be or may not be met, there is one thing which should be clear at the back of our minds: There can be no such thing as 'total integration' of children with special educational needs. If a majority of these children is to be effectively retained in a range of more or less ordinary settings, then, a minority of the most handicapped must have even more specialised provision.

What seems to be lacking in most education systems is realization that integration also means special provision – even with a more specialized focus of day and residential provision for the small minority severely handicapped in order to provide a graded response to different kinds of levels of difficulty especially for those with severe problems of behaviour.

### **Improving Integration Outcomes**

Research comparing special education placement for children with special needs could probably not be done today. In most industrialized nations, integration of special needs children into ordinary settings is now an official policy, so it would be difficult to find any segregated children to compare with integrated ones.

This is not, however, to suggest that all children in these countries have been fully integrated. Developing nations are also in the process of formulating integration policies. In Zimbabwe, integration became a national education policy in 1983 following the formation of the Schools

Psychological Services. In 1992, the Zimbabwe Parliament passed the Disabled Persons Act. According to this Act, all disabled persons have the right to operate in ordinary settings, educationally, socially, economically and politically.

Once a nation and indeed the society as a whole accept the process of integration, then attention must be directed towards identifying appropriate programmes for use in regular settings or in conjunction with them to ensure positive academic and social outcomes for the integrated children.

Through research three such relevant programmes have been recommended and these are:

- *consulting models* in which trained consultants assist regular classroom teachers to accommodate the needs of handicapped children;
- *co-operative learning models* in which children work in mixed – ability groups to help one another learn;
- *individual instruction models*, in which all children work at their own levels and rates.

## Conclusion

The principal implication of research on educating special needs children in ordinary settings is clear. While those children experience difficulties in regular settings, these difficulties should be dealt with by re-structuring the regular setting programmes to meet more effectively the needs of all children. Segregated settings are sometimes equal, but are hardly ever superior, to integrated placements for the academic and social programmes of handicapped children. In fact, one possible outcome of the search for effective programmes for use in integrated settings will be



realization that all children are 'special' in that they have unique academic, social and special needs regardless of whether or not they are 'normal' or 'subnormal' as implied by segregationists.

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